

---

## Book Review

### **Balázs Majtényi and György Majtényi (2016) *A Contemporary History of Exclusion. The Roma Issue in Hungary from 1945 to 2015*. Budapest; New York: Central European University Press. 242 pages.**

The first version of Balázs Majtényi and György Majtényi's book was published in 2012 for Hungarian readers under the title *The Gypsy Issue in Hungary, 1945-2010* (*Cigánykérdés Magyarországon, 1945-2010*). This was followed in 2016 by a second edition for an international audience with a new heading (*A contemporary history of exclusion. The Roma Issue in Hungary from 1945 to 2015*), complemented with an analysis of the following five years.

According to statements by the writers, the goals of this volume are, on the one hand, to illustrate the history of the Hungarian Roma community based on state policy documents and in the context of Hungarian national history, while on the other hand the authors wish to create a kind of Roma 'counter history' that opposes prevailing majoritarian - and often stereotyped and prejudiced - knowledge concerning the Roma. The reason the authors discuss the Hungarian Roma community's history in the framework of Hungarian national history is that they think that the concept of the Hungarian nation must also encompass the excluded Roma, so by this means they seek to contribute to the integration of the Roma community.

Regarding the research methods, the writers point out that they follow an emancipatory structuralist approach when making claims about the different aspects of the Roma issue, while remaining open to the application of other analytical viewpoints and to self-reflection. Readers meet the authors' resulting human-rights focused approach through their descriptions and analyses. This approach is especially important if we consider that the Hungarian Roma community, a community excluded and discriminated against, faces ongoing human rights problems (difficulties that arise from their daily experiences which become integral problems in their lives). A Roma person reading this book would feel that the authors are familiar with the difficulties in their communities, indicating that the authors have succeeded in using so-called inner vision in respect of the ethnic group under discussion.

The book consists of six main parts: The Introduction discusses the context of Roma identity and history, but the writers also comment on Roma history sources as well, in the same way as they do during the examination of basic and unavoidable questions such as 'What does Hungarian and Roma identity mean in practice?', 'How are these identities constructed?', and 'What kind of phenomena characterize them?'

The following chapters deal with the political and social events of Roma history in a Hungarian context. The second chapter discusses Roma history from 1945-1961, the third from 1961-1989/1990, the fourth from 1989/1990-2010, and the fifth from 2010-2015. In the sixth chapter a summary of the book is presented.

The volume only partly and sporadically refers to the era before World War II, which means that the reader will primarily learn about Roma community history from 1945 until the present.

---

Referring to the six decades from 1945-2015 the authors discuss the phenomena of the black ID cards given to Roma who followed a migrant lifestyle; forced bathing (when members of the Roma community were singled out and forced to take disinfecting baths containing different chemicals and pesticides); and the poor relationship between the police and the Roma. However, one can also read about the activity of Mária László, the first significant representative of the Hungarian Roma community. Majtényi and Majtényi elaborate on and analyse the 1961 decree of the Hungarian Socialist Worker Party's Central Committee's Politburo (which governed communist Hungary) which did not consider the Hungarian Roma community to be a separate nationality group, but defined it as a lesser segment of society which needed to be developed. The relationship between Roma and non-Roma people is also discussed through a presentation of hierarchical and client-patron types of interaction. The authors describe the problem of the impossibility of Roma self-organization during the socialist era. They also write about the assimilation policies in existence from 1961-1989/1990 based on the above-mentioned 1961 decree of the Central Committee's Politburo of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party. As the volume also provides information about the last two and a half decades of history, readers can trace the attitudes of the democratic powers and governments, and see how oppression that originated in the past has been replicated in the practices of today's political actors. That is, the authors trace the continuation of the process of discrimination and exclusion across decades, observing how self-organized Roma have tried to fight such obstructionist behaviour, and how progressive Roma intellectuals have failed as a consequence of divisive majoritarian political practices.

The book discusses the social aspects of the Roma issue as well. In particular, topics such as wage work, housing, the social benefits system, education, employment, and segregation are dealt with.

One may say that the volume will not contribute new information to Hungarian Roma experts, primarily because the book is a (good) summary of relevant literature from earlier decades. The main historical events that are discussed are already well-known. For instance, the role of black ID cards in the life of the Roma community has already been described by Gyula Barna Purcsi (Purcsi, 2001). Mária László's place in Hungarian Roma history after 1945 was discussed in Ernő Kállai's study (Kállai, 2009), while the 1961 decree of the Hungarian Socialist Worker Party's Central Committee's Politburo was elaborated on by Barna Mezey, László Pomogyi, and István Tauber (Mezey et al., 1986). In the same way, for similar information we can refer to the research activity of the Roma Press Center that published a book about the forced bathing of the Roma (Bernáth, 2002). Nevertheless, this book is a good synthesis of literature in English, because, besides the above-mentioned authors and publishers, it also discusses the most significant and relevant work of János Ladányi, Iván Szélenyi, Péter Szuhay, Gábor Havas, Csaba Dupcsik, István Kemény, Michael Stewart and Jean-Pierre Liégeois. Especially valuable are those new archival data that illuminate previously unknown details. Especially those new archival data are valuable that illuminate previously unknown details such as the Council of the Zala County Executive Committee Administrative Committee's Decree on keeping records of Gypsies from 1959, or the Executive Committee of the Békés County Council's report on the cultural situation and employment problems of Gypsies living in the

county; but we may mention the letter of the Roma community of Döge as well, whose representatives complained about the exclusionary behaviour of the local Executive Committee Secretary who did not want to hire them to operate machines.

The volume is illustrated by a number of photographs of families, film productions, holocaust survivors, wage work, gypsy settlements, house-building events, pictures from everyday life, school moments, placards, politicians, and Roma intellectuals. Their arrangement is a bit unpredictable and the reader will experience that they often do not fit the topic under discussion. Some texts are appropriately accompanied by photographs, while in other cases it is not clear how the given pictures are linked to content.

In summary, this volume is recommended for readers who are not familiar with Hungarian Roma issues from 1945-2015, about which this book is a very good and objective guide. However, it is also recommended to experts who would like to explore previously unseen archival data in their work.

**Péter Bogdán** ([bogdan.peter@tk.mta.hu](mailto:bogdan.peter@tk.mta.hu))

Hungarian Academy of Sciences Centre for Social Sciences  
Institute for Minority Studies, Department of Roma Studies, Hungary

### *References*

- Mezey, B., Pomogyi, L. and I. Tauber (1986) *A magyarországi cigánykérdés dokumentumokban 1422-1985 (The Hungarian gypsy issue in documents from 1422 to 1985)*. Budapest: Kossuth Kiadó.
- Purcsi, B. Gy. (2001) Fekete személyi igazolvány és munkatábor - Kísérlet a cigánykérdés "megoldására" az ötvenes évek Magyarországon? (Black identity card and concentration camp. Attempt to find a solution to the Gypsy issue?). *Beszélő*, 6(6): 26-37.
- Bernáth, G. (2002) *Kényszermosdatások a cigánytelepeken (1940 - 1985) (Forced bathings on Gypsy sites [1940-1985])*. Budapest: Roma Sajtóközpont.
- Kállai, E. (2009) Cigányok/romák Magyarországon - Társadalomtörténeti vázlat (Gypsies/the Roma in Hungary - A Socio-historical Outline). In Kállai, E. and L. Kovács (Eds.) *Megismerés és elfogadás - Pedagógiai kihívások és roma közösségek a 21. század iskolájában (Cognition and acceptance - Pedagogical challenges and Roma communities in the school of the 21<sup>st</sup> century)*. Budapest: Nyitott Könyvműhely. 156-174.